



The Dance of the Flamingo

Written by Anita Mani

Photographs by Anita Mani and Vijay Kumar Sethi



'The Dance of the Flamingo' by Anita Mani
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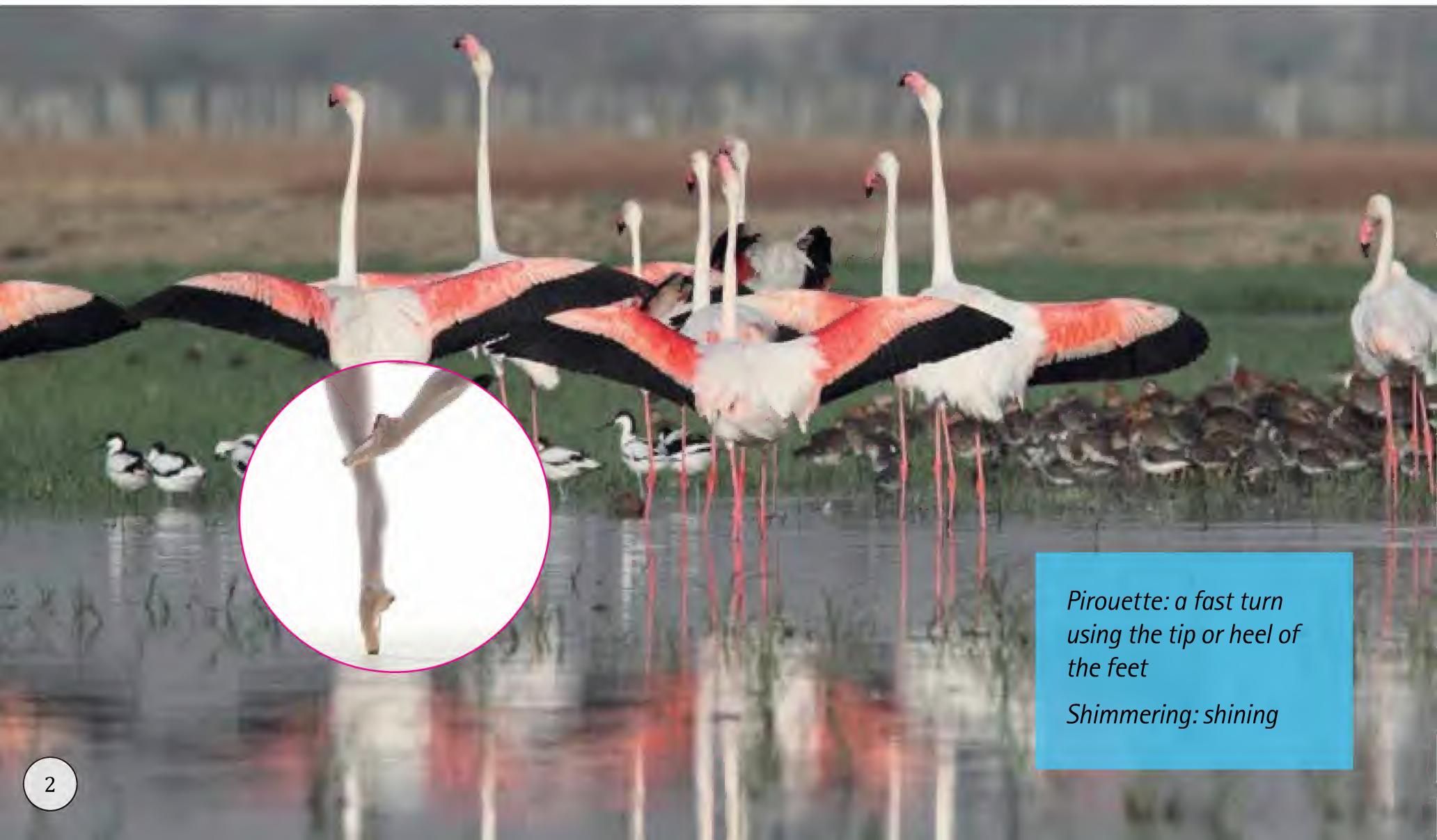


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Like ballet dancers they pirouette on one leg, raising graceful shimmering pink wings... a cloud of pink on a blue lake. Flamingos are the 'beauty queens' of the bird world.



Pirouette: a fast turn using the tip or heel of the feet

Shimmering: shining

The word 'flamingo' comes from the Spanish word 'flamenco' which means fire. It refers to the bright colour of the flamingo's feathers.

Flamenco is also the name of a famous dance from Spain, a country in Europe. Some people believe that the flamenco dance was so named as the dancers imitated the movements of the flamingo.



When you think of flamingos, you always remember their beautiful pink colour. Amazingly, the birds get this colour from the food they eat!

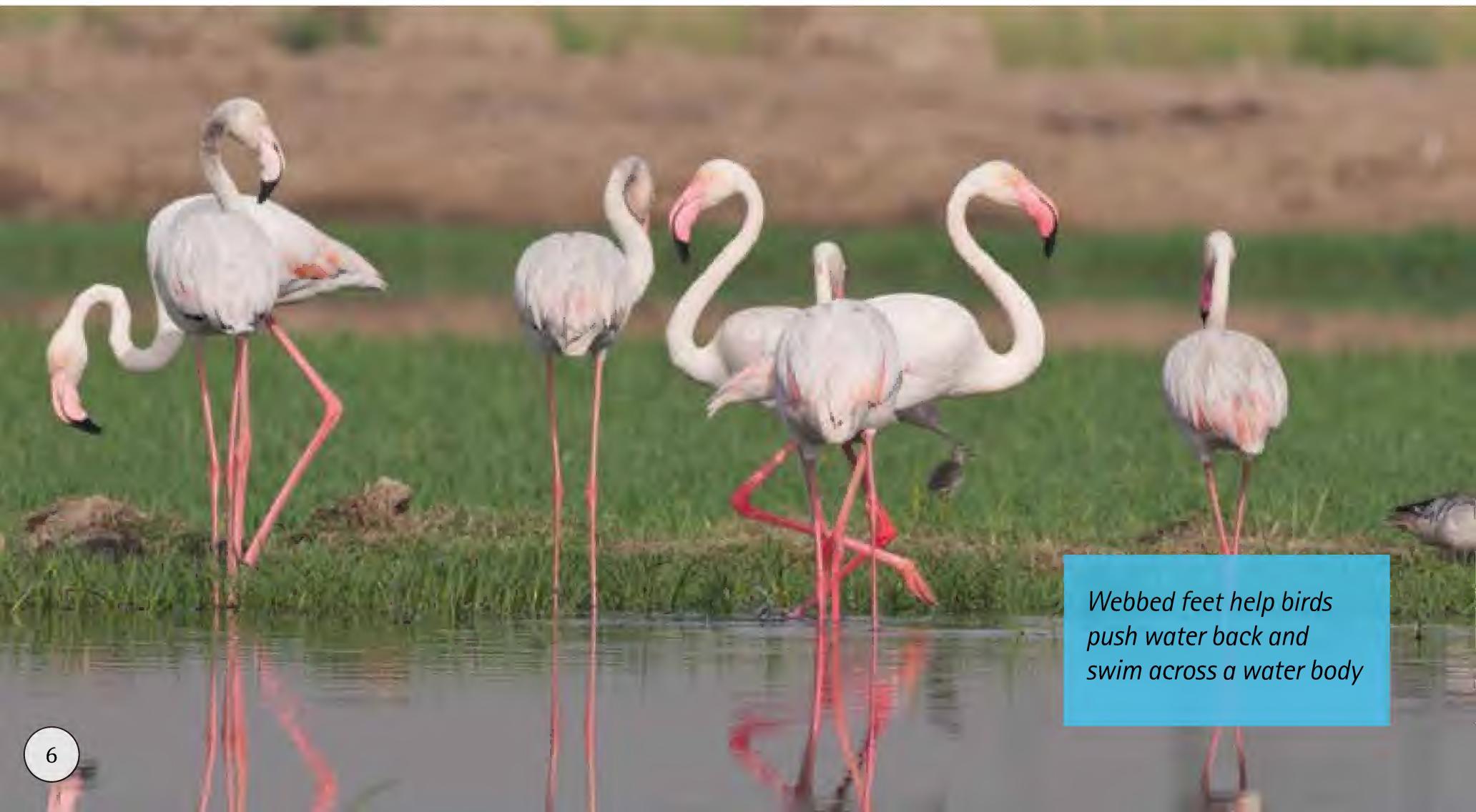
Flamingos eat organisms such as plankton, shrimps, crabs and tiny water plants. All of these have special colouring agents which cause a flamingo to turn pink when it eats them. If you take a flamingo away from its natural habitat and don't feed it these kinds of food, their colour will turn whiter and whiter as days pass by.



Flamingos are water birds – they live and feed near the sea coast and lakes as the food they eat is found in water. They are quite tall – some of them can grow up to a height of 1.5 metres. That is almost as tall as a human!



These birds have very long legs so they can walk far into the water. Although most photos will show you pictures of flamingos wading in the shallow water, these birds can also swim! Like other water birds such as ducks, flamingos have webbed feet.



Webbed feet help birds push water back and swim across a water body

They are also powerful fliers and can fly at speeds of more than 50 kilometres an hour – that's the speed at which cars move on roads.

They can travel over long distances and even cover the distance of nearly 500 kilometres at one time – that's more than the distance between Delhi and Lucknow!





Watching a flock take off is an amazing sight – like an airplane, they need to pick up speed by running before they can lift off. They run, flapping their wings before gracefully lifting off into the sky.



What makes the flamingo stand out? Other than its pink colour, one of the things that make the flamingo so different from other birds is its long, long neck! The flamingo's neck is made up of 19 bones!

The long neck is extremely useful in helping the flamingo fish for its food – it's almost like having an extra-long fishing rod.

The lifespan of a bird is connected to its size – the bigger it is, the longer it lives. Given how big they are, it is not surprising that flamingos live quite long.

Flamingos usually live for 20-30 years. The Greater Flamingo lives the longest, up to 30-33 years. Among birds, flamingos have one of the longest lifespans.



There are just six kinds of flamingos in all, but they are found all over the world, from North and South America to Europe, Africa and Asia.



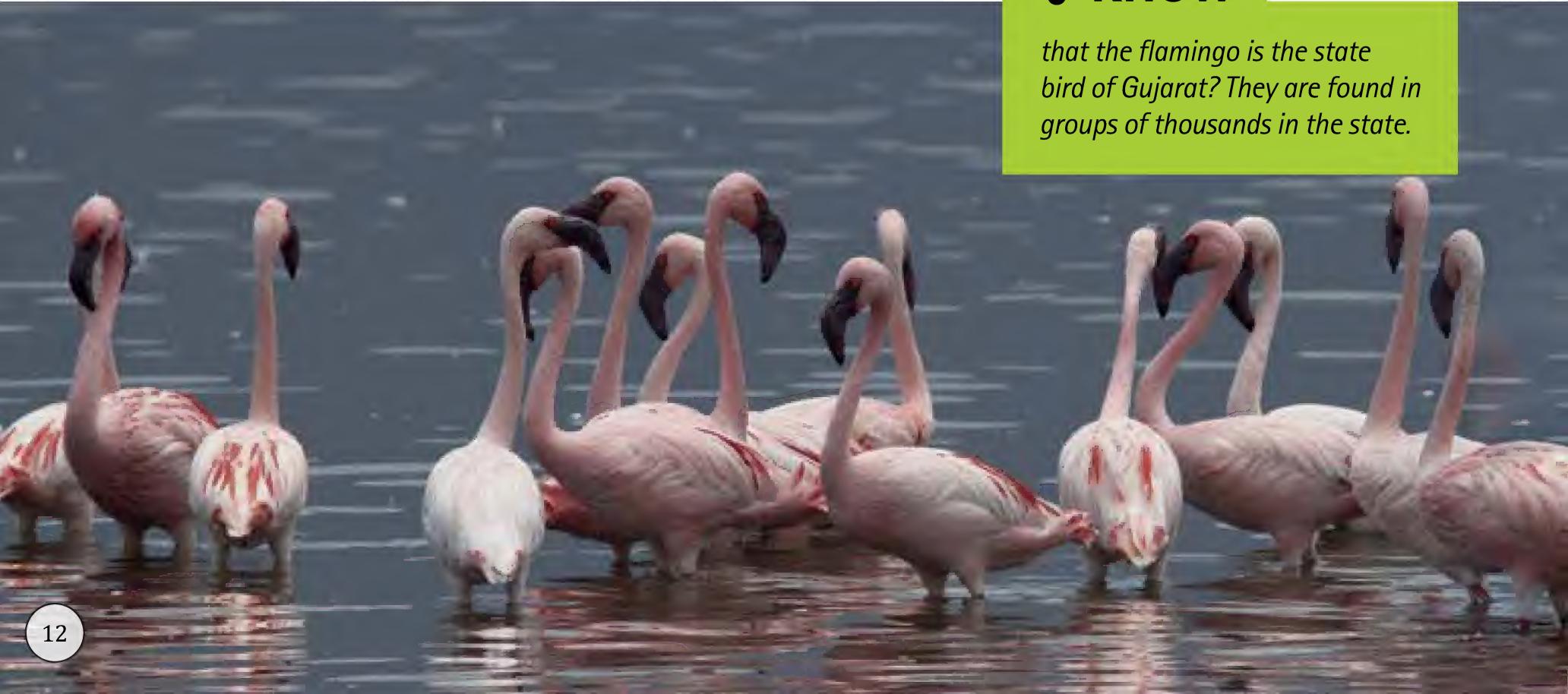
? Did you know

that the most endangered species of flamingo is the Andean flamingo – less than 30,000 of these birds are left in the world.

Endangered: In danger of becoming extinct, when not even one of a certain kind of animal is left in the world

In India, flamingos are found in many places across the country. Large numbers are seen in states like Rajasthan, Gujarat, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

In India we see two kinds of flamingos – the Greater Flamingo and the Lesser Flamingo. As you may have guessed, the Greater Flamingo is bigger than its shorter cousin, the Lesser Flamingo.



? Did you know

that the flamingo is the state bird of Gujarat? They are found in groups of thousands in the state.

Flamingos are often found in huge flocks of thousands of birds that look like carpets of pink flowers scattered over the surface of blue lakes and water bodies.

The largest flocks of flamingos are found in the lakes of East Africa – here, sometimes, more than a million gather at a time.

Flamingos like to live in large groups as they feel safer that way. When these birds hunt for food, they spend a lot of time with their heads in the water. So, it is useful to be part of a big group where there's always someone to alert you of danger nearby.



A group of flamingos is called a flock or a colony.



This is a photograph of a flock of Lesser Flamingos taken at Lake Bogoria in East Africa. Lake Bogoria is a very unique kind of water body called a 'soda' lake. The water in soda lakes has a huge quantity of different kinds of salts mixed in it. This keeps away many animals that need freshwater with less salt to drink – but for the flamingo, these soda lakes are like a five-star restaurant!

That's because, in these salt-rich lakes, a variety of plants grow in huge numbers. These plants are the favourite food of flamingos. With no other competition for this food, flamingos flock to these lakes to eat the plants.

The water of the soda lakes is almost like an 'alkali' – most animals also keep away as stepping into the water could burn their skin! Flamingos are one of the few kinds of animals that can safely step into a soda lake. No wonder they feel very safe here – when danger threatens, they can simply step deeper into the water.



One of the most unusual things about the flamingo is the way it eats.

- First the flamingo mixes up the water and mud nearby using its feet and beak.
- It then dips its beak down and sometimes puts its entire head under water and scoops up a cup full of muddy water in its beak.
- The upside-down beak is then used like a sieve (like the steel strainer used to drain out tea leaves when making chai). Water drips out of the beak, leaving behind tiny plants and animals for the bird to munch on.

? Did you know

that the flamingo eats with its head upside down?



When it is time to start a family, flamingos start 'putting on make-up' in order to make themselves look attractive to a partner. Of course, they don't reach out for powder and lipstick. Instead, they spread the oil produced by a gland (a kind of body part) near their tails over their feathers, turning them a brighter pink.

Unlike other birds, flamingos do not lay eggs every year – they do so only when it rains. Rain gives them materials to build their nest. Rainwater ponds and lakes are home to tiny water creatures that are the flamingo's food. So rainfall is very important to mama birds and the always hungry chicks.

Since flamingos live in large colonies, depending on the rainfall, either the whole colony will be full of chicks, or there won't be any young bird at all.

Before the eggs can be laid, the nest has to be built. Unlike birds that build nests made of twigs on trees, flamingos build their nests on the ground. They use sticks, stones and mud to create a mound that looks like a little volcano on the ground. The design of the nest is very clever really – the top of the mound dips like a saucer, so that the egg does not roll away.

Flamingo eggs can be quite big. So a female bird mostly lays only one egg. For almost a month, the parent birds take turns to keep the egg warm, by sitting on it. This is called incubation. At the end of this long wait, a young chick hatches out. Surprise, surprise! The chick is not pink or red like its parents but grey and white. Young flamingos take three years to take on the pink-red colour.

The real work for papa and mama begins after the young one hatches out of the egg. For a week or two, the baby bird stays in the nest and is fed a kind of milk that the parents make in their own bodies. Then, the parents teach it to hunt for water creatures and the baby bird becomes more independent.

You would have heard of crèches – a play school where parents who need to go out to work leave their kids during the day. You may have been to a crèche when much younger. Believe it or not, flamingo colonies also operate their own crèches. A group of adults takes care of large groups of young ones. Some crèches can have thousands of birds! Parents visit the crèches to feed their own young ones.

Were you wondering how parents recognise their babies in such big groups? Well, it's through their voice.

Flamingos are noisy birds and talk a lot to each other by making grunting, honking (like a car horn) and even growling sounds. It's by calling out to each other that flocks stay together.



Flamingos are water birds – so what is their role in this environment? These birds eat algae and small organisms in water bodies and thus prevent a wetland from becoming choked with algae.

These birds are very popular with tourists who visit many areas of the world just to see them. Many people earn a living from these tourists by operating hotels, restaurants and driving around visitors. So, flamingos help people earn a living in these areas.



So, does this beautiful bird have natural enemies or predators? Because of where they live, in soda lakes and water bodies that have high alkali content, flamingos are generally well protected. Young birds may sometimes be hunted by eagles, hyenas and jackals.

But one of the biggest threats to these birds is us, humans. We don't hunt them for meat, but by building roads, farms, factories and towns near their habitats, we disturb the colonies and force them out of their homes. This may affect the number of young ones born in a colony as flamingos may find it difficult to find other habitats that are as well suited to them.







The sight of these delicate, pretty birds that look like living lotuses on water, is one of the most wonderful visions in the natural world. Let's make sure that this is one vision that doesn't fade away but continues to be enjoyed in the years to come.





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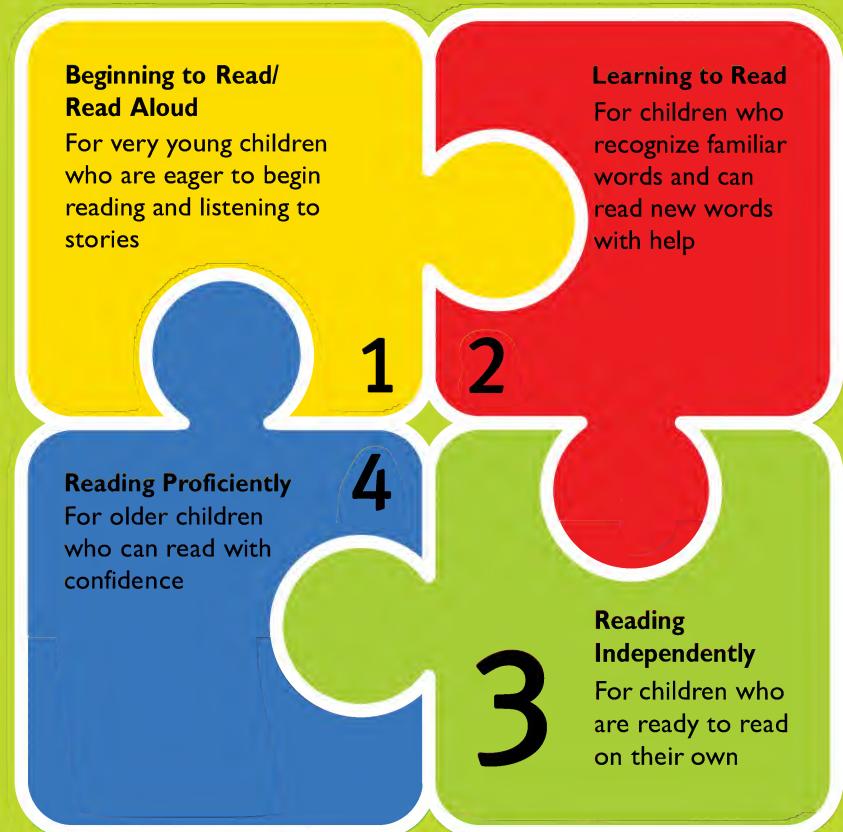


After many years spent as a journalist, investment banker and managing a tech start-up, Anita now spends her time writing for children. She owns and runs *Child Friendly News*, a newspaper for young children under 14 (www.childfriendlynews.com). She can also be found in India's wild places, spotting and photographing our country's incredibly rich birdlife. The interest in birds, which was inspired by her son, has taken her from the high Himalayas to sandy beaches of South India, from the lush wetlands of the Gangetic plain to the desert landscape of western India.

This book is 'for Maitreya, who opened my eyes skyward to the beauty of birds.'

**Living like lotus flowers on water, the sight of pink flamingos
is one of the most beautiful sights of the natural world. Why
are they pink? Do they put on make-up? Do they have even a
single bone in their long neck? Here is a book of photographs
that answers all the questions about these graceful birds.**

Learning to read – level by level. This is a Level 3 book.



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